

Cornel West, Review of Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: the languages of morals and their discontents*, *Theology Today* 46 (1) (April 1989), 66-68.

Jeffrey Stout is one of the most penetrating and provocative philosophers on the American scene. He also is the leading moral critic of a pragmatic bent concerned with the relations between secular thought and religious traditions as well as the history of modern Western ethics. In his exciting new book, Stout extends his concerns into the terrain of social criticism. Although he still grapples with the challenges of skepticism, relativism, and nihilism to his own sophisticated historicist perspective, it is clear that the *élan vital* of the text is the role and function of moral discourse in contemporary American society. In my brief response to Stout's fascinating book, I shall highlight what I consider to be the fundamental contribution Stout makes to how we should do our work as cultural critics. This contribution consists of his call for a new mode of social criticism—a mode I shall dub *improvisational criticism*.

Stout uses such phrases as "creative bricolage," "eclectic and pragmatic moral bricoleur," and "moral bricolage" to describe his conception of cultural criticism. He is well aware that these phrases must be understood contextually; that is, relative to the available traditions or fragments of traditions vital and vibrant at this particular moment in American society, namely, liberalism, civic republicanism, and religious traditions. What interests me here is not so much that Stout does not provide us with a fully elaborated account of what strands and streams of our traditions could and should be brought together in order to bring "into focus the resources that liberal society makes available for its own transformation." The concrete cases he treats give us some sense of how a subtle improvisational moral critic melts icy cold binary oppositions and breaks down rigid distinctions for

the purposes of capturing the complexity and concrete character of an issue. Rather, I would like to note the degree to which Stout's mode of cultural criticism is an advance beyond Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatic defense of the Enlightenment and Alasdair MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian trashing of the Enlightenment. This Rorty-MacIntyre debate—reproduced in various ways between liberals like Ronald Dworkin and communitarians like Michael Sandel, upbeat critical theorists like Jürgen Habermas and downbeat civic republicans like Robert Bellah—signifies a crucial shift for contemporary pragmatic thinkers such as Stout toward explicit engagement in social and political philosophy. Stout's improvisational criticism is the most significant attempt I know to advance the dialogue between neo-pragmatic liberals and neo-Aristotelian (or neo-Hegelian) anti-liberals.

The major strength of Stout's project is that it mediates the clashing perspectives by means of *immanent criticism*. It proceeds by highly sympathetic and charitable readings of both viewpoints, then teases out internal inconsistencies, blindnesses, and contradictions, all in order to disclose common ground between supposedly antagonistic positions. This approach is Socratic rather than Hegelian—and thoroughly dialectical. So, there is no grand third moment or emergent synthesis with elements of both positions intact, but rather a mutual recognition by both sides of fallacious assumptions and convergent values that bond them. The outcome is that the limited lenses through which they viewed each other are removed. This removal does not result in epistemic lucidity, but rather in possible convergence and potential solidarity. Stout's treatment of the widely-heralded liberalism/communitarianism debate is exemplary in this regard.

Stout's notion of moral bricolage—or improvisational criticism—is a much richer notion than the garden variety pragmatic idea of experimentalism and the relativist rendering of

eclecticism. Stout's improvisational criticism is a telos-ridden, ideology-laden activity that requires thorough interrogation of prospective teleological and ideological candidates—yet, it is mindful of the inescapable character of teleology and ideology in our ethical stances. It thereby sidesteps the common criticism of certain pragmatic ideas of experimentalism in which technique tends to predominate over ends. Similarly, Stout's improvisational criticism puts a premium on rigorous thought, logical reflection, and warranted assertability. Therefore, it shuns any forms of sloppy thinking that settle for vast cathartic variety at the expense of high *rational* quality. In this way, it jettisons relativistic versions of eclecticism.

The major weakness of Stout's improvisational criticism is that it runs the risk of being so preoccupied with arriving at the golden mean between extremes that it often slights structural deficiencies—in rhetorics, cultures, societies—that reinforce the very polarizations he wants to mediate. This weakness is rooted in the pivotal terms in Stout's discourse. These terms—"crisis," "impasse," "malaise," "dramatic resolution"—are part of a discourse centered on the *therapeutic* and the *conversational*. The influential figures here are Wittgenstein and Rorty. The problem is that Wittgensteinian and Rortian metaphors are not particularly useful for serious social criticism. The shift from epistemic argumentation and intellectual history to cultural criticism renders these crucial terms suspect. The content and character of an epistemic crisis, conversational impasse, or discursive malaise is quite different from a social crisis, societal impasse, or political malaise. In one sense, Stout is aware of this point. Yet, his social criticism often proceeds as if the key terms in his discourse have adequately grappled with issues of structural deficiencies, operations of social power, cultural capital, or economic constraints. This is why his ingenious arrival at common ground is persuasive at the

dialogic level of philosophic reflection, but at most only plausible at the concrete levels of power and politics. Needless to say, he would have had to write another and different kind of book to do what I request. Yet, a social critic of Stout's talent and ambition must not only go about his work with both eyes open, but also with both hands dirty.